

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 2416

As Reported by House Committee On:
Natural Resources, Ecology & Parks
Appropriations

Title: An act relating to state park fees.

Brief Description: Concerning state park fees.

Sponsors: Representatives Kessler, Hasegawa, Hunt, Haigh, McIntire, Dunshee, B. Sullivan and Takko.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Natural Resources, Ecology & Parks: 1/13/06, 1/17/06 [DPS];
Appropriations: 2/1/06, 2/2/06 [DPS(NREP)].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Prohibits the State Parks and Recreation Commission from charging a fee for parking or for general park access.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, ECOLOGY & PARKS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by Representatives B. Sullivan, Chair; Upthegrove, Vice Chair; Buck, Ranking Minority Member; Kretz, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Blake, Chandler, Dickerson, Eickmeyer, Hunt, Kagi and Orcutt.

Staff: Jeff Olsen (786-7157).

Background:

The Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission (Commission) is granted authority to care for and supervise the state parks system. The Commission also has the authority to charge fees for the use of facilities. On January 1, 2003, the Commission authorized a \$7 daily parking fee and a \$70 annual parking pass, discounted to \$5 per day and \$50 per year until January 2008. Moneys collected from parking fees are deposited into the Parks Renewal and Stewardship Account and are used for state parks' operations, development, and renovations.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

The Commission is prohibited from charging a fee for parking or for general park access.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute removes provisions authorizing the Department of Licensing to collect an additional \$5 fee from persons at the time of vehicle registration to be used for the operation and maintenance of the state parks system.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: Budget shortfalls in the past resulted in pressure to find new revenues for state parks by adopting a day use fee. The day use fee has resulted in reduced attendance, high collection costs, AND negative impacts to tourism. Attendance has decreased by 20 percent. Citizens, particularly the poor and elderly, have been negatively impacted by the fees. Local parks are also being impacted with increased attendance. People already own their state parks and have a right to enjoy them without having to pay a parking fee.

(Neutral) Implementing the vehicle license fee will require programming changes and changes to the renewal form, resulting in new costs. Washington's experience with voluntary fees, organ donation awareness for example, has resulted in low participation rates.

(With concerns) No one likes the parking fee; however, if the fee is removed it needs to be replaced with a stable, long-term funding source. There needs to be some flexibility to allow the Commission to collect other types of parking fees. Parking fees have brought some improvements, vandalism is down, facilities have been improved, and staff have been hired to allow rangers to focus on their primary duties.

Testimony Against: None.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Kessler, prime sponsor; Dennis Eagle, Washington Federation of State Employees; Nora Porter and Jean Dunbar, Fort Worden Advisory Committee; and George Randels, City of Port Townsend Planning Commission and Fort Worden Advisory Committee.

(Neutral) Deb McCurley, Department of Licensing; and Keith Long, Department of Licensing.

(With concerns) Joan Thomas, Fred Romero and Pam Wilkins Ripp, Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission; and Jim King, Citizens for Parks and Recreation.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Majority Report: The substitute bill by Committee on Natural Resources, Ecology & Parks be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 30 members: Representatives Sommers, Chair; Fromhold, Vice Chair; Alexander, Ranking Minority Member; Anderson, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; McDonald, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Armstrong, Bailey, Buri, Chandler, Clements, Cody, Conway, Darneille, Dunshee, Grant, Haigh, Hinkle, Hunter, Kagi, Kenney, Kessler, Linville, McDermott, Miloscia, Pearson, Priest, Schual-Berke, P. Sullivan, Talcott and Walsh.

Staff: Alicia Paatsch (786-7178).

Summary of Recommendation of Committee On Appropriations Compared to Recommendation of Committee On Natural Resources, Ecology & Parks:

No new changes were recommended.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: Fort Warden State Park is one of the largest parks, has a conference center, and is an anchor in our community for tourism. We could not add a \$5.00 fee that would deter attendance. Parks said that they would generate \$10 million a biennium from parking fees and they actually generated \$7 million. Last year revenue actually went down from parking fees at the \$5.00 cost and now Parks is going to raise the parking fee to \$7.00.

Testimony Against: In 2002 to save \$200,000 out of Parks budget, Parks was told to get revenue from lease holders. This didn't happen and four parks were closed. In 2003 Parks implemented a statewide parking fee to avoid closing parks and to tackle the deferred maintenance problem. If the parking fee is taken away without replacement revenue, we'll be back to closing parks. We applaud the removal of a barrier to people enjoying parks but we need a permanent, stable funding source. The parking fee is the second largest revenue source for Parks. In 2001 \$2.1 million was cut from Parks budget, in 2003 Parks began to collect the parking fee and kept parks open, and in 2005 parking fees were shifted from deferred maintenance to fund the base operating budget of Parks. We saw a reduction in services such as lifeguards at beaches and interpretive opportunities, so we implemented the parking fee and the Legislature understood that we needed to hire park aides to collect the fee and do other things to allow rangers to keep doing their job.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Nora Porter.

(Concerns) Dennis Eagle, Washington Federation of State Employees.

(Opposed) Joan Thomas, Parks Commission Vice-Chair; Jim King, Citizens for Parks and Recreation; and Rex Derr, State Parks Director.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.